French Nuclear Posture

(Abstract from the french policy distributed at the 2000 NPT Conference)

As a nuclear-weapon State and party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, France subscribes fully to the ultimate goals of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons and the conclusion of a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control [(1)]. France works with determination and vigilance against the nuclear arms race and for the prevention of the proliferation of such weapons.

Since the beginnings of its policy of nuclear deterrence, France has consistently sought to maintain its nuclear arsenal at the lowest level required to ensure its own security, in accordance with the so-called "sufficiency" principle. It has consistently refused to enter into competition in this area with the other nuclear powers. For example, France chose not to equip itself with all the nuclear weapons systems which could have been envisaged given the technological resources at its disposal.

Furthermore, France consistently refused to consider nuclear weapons as war-fighting assets. At its maximum level during the Cold War, the French nuclear arsenal never exceeded a few hundred warheads.

Changes in the strategic environment allowed France to modify the structure of its nuclear forces and to make significant unilateral reductions. As the President of the Republic declared on 23 February 1996 [(2)] : "We must take advantage of the respite offered by the current strategic situation to review our nuclear posture. Our choice of resources must be founded on the same principles of sufficiency and credibility that we have consistently followed."

The alert status of French nuclear forces was reduced twice, in 1992 and in 1996. Those reductions related to both the response times of forces and the numbers of weapon systems on alert : the dismantling of the surface-to-surface strategic component on the Plateau d'Albion, two SSBNs at sea at all times if necessary, instead of three as was the case in the early 1990s and, where air forces are concerned, a lengthening of alert times and the de-alerting of Mirage IV strategic aircraft, in 1996.

The President of the Republic announced in 1997 that on completion of the dismantling of missiles on the Plateau d'Albion, no component of the French nuclear deterrent force remained aimed at designated targets.

(1) Preambule to Decision 2 of the NPT Review and Extension Conference, 11 May 1995.
(2) Speech to the Armed Forces by the President of the Republic

In order to adjust the format of its deterrent forces to the new context, France has chosen not to continue development of several programs and has reduced its nuclear stockpile, as well as the expenditure allocated to the military nuclear sector.

The following steps were taken in 1991 and 1992 :

- Abandonment of the strategic surface-to-surface S45 missile programme, which had been intended to replace the S3D missiles on the Plateau d'Albion,
- Early withdrawal of the Pluton short-range surface-to-surface missiles,
- Early withdrawal from service and dismantling of the AN 52 nuclear bombs carried by Jaguar and Mirage III aircraft,
- A reduction in the number of SSBNs in service from 6 to 5 and a longer production timetable for new generation SSBNs,
- A cut in the Hadès short-range surface-to-surface missile programme from 120 to 30 units, plus the decision to "mothball" rather than deploy this weapons system.

In 1996, the President of the Republic placed a limit of 4 on the number of SSBNs making up the sea-based component, instead of the previous 5. Within that force, only three SSBNs are maintained in the operational cycle.

The decisions taken in 1996 have led to the withdrawal of Mirage IV strategic aircraft from nuclear missions. Only Mirage 2000N and Super-Etendard aircraft have retained their capability for carrying nuclear air-to-ground medium-range missiles (ASMP).

In 1996, the President of the Republic announced the withdrawal from service of the surface-to-surface component on the Plateau d'Albion, the closure of this site and the final withdrawal of the Hadès weapon system, followed by the dismantling of its missiles.

The dismantling of the eighteen S3D strategic missiles with megaton warheads was completed in 1998 and that of the thirty Hadès short-range missiles in 1997. France is now the only nuclear-weapon State to have totally eliminated its formerly deployed surface-to-surface nuclear weapon systems.

The cuts made in 1996 came in addition to those of 1991 an 1992. France has therefore made substantial reductions in the number of its nuclear weapons systems since the end of the Cold War. Of the six systems deployed in 1990 (Mirage IV strategic aircraft, submarine-launched missiles, surface-to-surface strategic missiles on the Plateau d'Albion, surface-to-surface short-range missiles, Jaguar and Mirage III aircraft armed with nuclear air-to-ground bombs, Mirage 2000N and Super Etendard aircraft armed with medium-range air-to-surface missiles), only two now remain (submarine-launched ballistic missiles and aircraft armed with air-to-surface missiles).

Alongside this, the total number of delivery vehicles has been cut by over half. Similarly, the share of the defense budget allocated to nuclear expenditure has been reduced by 58 % since 1990.

Following the unilateral moratorium on nuclear tests decided in April 1992 and after a final series of tests, France, on 29 January 1996, announced the cessation of all nuclear testing. This decision took practical shape in the complete dismantling of testing facilities in the Pacific, which was announced as early as 22 February 1996 and completed by the end of July 1998. This means that since the end of the Cold War and the signing of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), France is the only nuclear-weapon State to have closed down and dismantled its nuclear testing facilities.

For many years, France has been implementing a policy of genuine transparency with regard to its nuclear testing facilities. Notably, it has on several occasions welcomed visits by independent scientific evaluation teams to the atolls of Mururoa and Fangataufa.

Following two missions in 1991 and 1994, at the request of the French government, the IAEA undertook in April 1996, under the auspices of an international consultative committee of independent experts, an in-depth scientific survey of the radiological situation with respect to the atolls. This research on radionuclides included a study of the possible impact on human health. It had the task of determining whether risks currently exist or will exist in the future, and whether or not corrective measures are needed. The survey took almost two years and concluded that the atolls are structurally sound and that residual radioactive material is certain to remain confined over the long term. Given the low level of estimated exposure to radioacitivity, the atolls, which have never been permanently inhabited, could in fact be inhabited in total safety without need for corrective measures or radiological monitoring.

France was the first State to reach and implement a decision to dismantle its facilities for the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. This major initiative is intended to set an example by promoting non nuclear proliferation and disarmament. It furthers measures making worldwide access to materials needed for manufacturing nuclear weapons increasingly difficult.

France suspended as early as 1992 all production of plutonium for defence needs (Marcoule plant) and implemented a similar measure four years later with regard to highly enriched uranium (Pierrelatte uranium enrichment plant).

The spent fuel reprocessing plant at Marcoule, initially converted to purely civilian use, was closed down completely at the end of 1996. The operations to dismantle the facility are currently under way.

A decision to order the final shutdown and dismantling of the Pierrelatte uranium enrichment plant was taken in 1996 and immediately implemented.